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AUTHOR Bee, Jim
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ABSTRACT

This analysis of the British domestic situation comedy (sitcom) as a genre begins by noting that it is considered basically taxonomical, using the categories of character, narrative, and theme to develop understanding of its discursive strategies. Considered to be preliminary and tentative, the results of this analysis suggest that: (1) the sitcom deploys a small range of character-types that are significantly gender and class differentiated and referred to as a norm of the family, i.e., middle-class and patriarchal; (2) character or sitcom types are predominantly seen as wayward, inept, or rigid males--who dominate the narrative--and normal females--usually the wives--who share a problem of incompatibility because of varying degrees of socialization; (3) sitcom narrative draws in and involves viewers and produces amusement, which interrupts the narrative flow; (4) the basic dynamic of sitcom is set into motion by the interactions among incongruent characters trapped together to produce a steady state of disequilibrium; and (5) these relationships and types motivate the narrative and generate comedy. The discursive operations of sitcom texts are further explored and their ideological effects are assessed. Detailed analyses of the data are presented in six appendices and two recommended sources of information on humor in the seventh. (13 references) (CGD)

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JIM BEE

THE DISCOURSES OF BRITISH DOMESTIC SITCOM

Paper Presented to the
1986 International Television Studies Conference

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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Sitcom is a ubiquitous and popular tv genre yet little has so far been written about it. The work described here is an attempt at basic groundwork: describing sitcom as a genre. It concentrates on signification in British domestic sitcom - British sitcom is predominantly domestic (see appendix 6) - and is basically taxonomical, using the categories of character, narrative and theme to develop understanding of the discursive strategies of sitcom. The results are considered preliminary and tentative.

This work suggests that sitcom deploys a small range of character-types which are significantly gender and class differentiated and referred to a norm of the family which is middle-class and patriarchal. The character types can be mapped onto a model of socialisation in relation to which deviancy, the mainspring of the comedy, is under- or over- socialised and predominantly occupied by males who are variously wayward, inept or rigid. The norm, if occupied by a character at all, will generally be occupied by a wife.

Narrative in sitcom, it is suggested, has a double movement which draws viewers in sufficiently for involvement to take effect and produce amusement which thus interrupts narrative flow, a frustration of the usual binding-in of narrative compensated by amusement and achieved by a weakening of certain elements of

fictional narrative, particularly illusionism, voyeurism, identifications and hermeneutics. The narrative imperative to comedy limits sitcom as a revelatory genre.

The basic problematic of sitcoms consists of a steady state of disequilibrium given by incongruent characters trapped together. These relationships and types motivate the narrative and generate comedy principally around the themes of heterosexual coupling, parents and children, and domestic efficiency.

The discursive operations of sitcom texts are further explored and their idealogical effectivity assessed. Although they seem to be generally conservative there are unresolved questions about their acknowledgement of deviancy, their 'distanced' narration and the functioning of humour which make ideological effects difficult to guage.

1. CHARACTER

A. Characters and Types

Like all popular genres sitcom deploys a range of character-types. A taxonomy of such types enables a general model to be developed which helps elucidate the discourses and subject positions offered by the genre. As Ellis (1982) points out the series form requires a steady state of disequilibrium returned to at the end of each episode and as Cook (1982), among others, suggests sitcom's most basic strategy is to trap together incongruent characters. This incongruence of character motivates the comedy. A model of character-types demonstrates how this incongruence is usually organised.

Concentration on characterisation can be limiting since it is concerned with only one set of elements within the structure and functioning of a text and we need to relate character to narrative, mode of address and discourse, as is briefly attempted later. A frequently explored notion which can be particularly reductive is that of 'stereotypes' and this reductiveness can operate both in aesthetic discourse, which sees stereotypes as an insufficiently complex and therefore inferior form of characterisation to the novelistic, and in discourses on ideology where stereotypes may be taken as simple examples of hegemonic representation. In the former case a version of cultural elitism is at work in which popular culture can readily be dismissed as

inferior and forgotten: a position I do not need to take seriously here. The ideological discourse is more telling: it seems undeniably the case that certain, often oppressed, groups are represented in systematically limited or distorted ways, representations which are related to social power and therefore the operation of ideology. However, we need to bear in mind that, as Neale puts it:

> "When the concept of the stereotype and the methodology it implies are used for purposes of ideological analysis, their reductiveness can easily obscure or even erase altogether those features of a text and its systems which are not only equally pertinent to the analysis but could also open up further areas of enquiry". (Neale 1980 p 33).

The concept of stereotype tends to focus on repetition, at the expense of difference: similarities in representation across texts which tend to be assumed to signify an identity of textual and ideological operation. Such similarities are significant but so are differences, of both characterisation and textual operation. Careful attention needs to be paid to how character traits are marked in texts and how significance is generated around then.

> "Stereotyping (if the term is to be retained) will emerge not, or not simply, as a function of repetition, but rather as a crucial part of a process of differentiation. It is to that process that attention needs to be drawn". (ibid p 37).

Such attention it must be said cannot be part of this work which seeks to establish similarities of character portrayal.

Some recent work on stereotypes has tried to clarify the concept and how it might be used in the analysis of popular culture (Dyer 1977, 1979a and Perkins 1979). A useful suggestion here has been the value of positive stereotypes to oppressed groups such as gays (Dyer 1977), a suggestion which is also often made by feminists who call for a more 'ideal' representation of women. The limitations already mentioned apply to this positive stereotyping too. Whilst not denying the need for alternative representations, as Neale points out:

> ".... what is rarely considered is the textual mode within which either 'positive' or 'negative' characterisations are, have been or can be produced. There the limiting effects of a concentration on character and characterisation at the expense of attention to textual systems and modes of address become particularly apparent. Secondary forms of identification (such as identification with a character) achieve their effect and their meaning through their inscription within textual systems and strategies; in most forms of cinema, these depend in turn upon an identification with the text itself. It is this primary identification that provides the basis of the spectator's relationship to the text and its characters and so requires initial attention and analysis". (Neale 1980 p 35).

Accepting the above it remains the case that since popular TV is dependent on the use of 'types' we should spend some time looking at which 'types' are 'in play' in particular genres. In what follows I use the notion of 'type' rather than'stereotype'. Dyer (1977, 1979a) tries to differentiate (social) type from stereotype on the grounds of their relation to the consensus (social types inside, stereotypes outside) and therefore their narrative function but in the end admits it to be a matter of degree: there is no

systematic way of separating them. What we have is a scale which moves from the novelistic representation of character [1] at one extreme to the stereotype at the other, with most characters in between, being 'types' of varying degrees of complexity. Using the notion of type will also hopefully avoid some of the unhelpful connotative baggage of 'stereotype' without losing sight of the ideological effectivity of 'typing' generally.

An interesting question is to what extent the notion of stereotype operates at the moment of reading. If reading subjects perceive what they take to be a stereotype a common response seems to be to lose interest because the character is assumed to be predictable. It seems likely however that other textual operations might overcome this: for example a strongly hermeneutic narrative might fix attention anyway, and in sitcom the perception of a stereotype may be unimportant since although character and type of humour might be predicted the actual gags may well be novel. If this is so it would suggest that sitcom can use what may be perceived by many as stereotypes without detriment to its pleasure.

1 Dyer (1979b p 104 ff) identifies nine features of the novelistic representation of character: particularity, interest, autonomy, roundness, development, interiority, motivation, discrete identity, consistency.

B. Sitcom Types

For the twenty domestic sitcoms I examined [1] most of the characters could be grouped roughly into four types - characters who are wayward, inept, normal or rigid.

1. The Wayward (12/12 male)

These are generally pleasure seeking and shirk responsibilities. They tend to have many or all of the following characteristics: they are indolent, wily, vain, lascivious, droll, course, feckless. Most of the wayward are rogues but there is a less active variant which emphasis fecklessness.

2. The Inept (9/11 male)

These are relatively childlike or 'innocent' since they are physically, mentally or socially inept: 'children with adult earning power'. Often they are inept in all three ways though a distinction can be drawn between an emphasis on physical ineptitude and one of simplemindedness.

1 The procedure used here was to describe the characters in twenty British domestic sitcoms, chosen randomly, and then group them according to similarities. See Appendices for details of the sitcoms.

3. The Normal (11/11 female)

These are many or all of the following: honest, efficient, sincere, careful, assauging, dutiful, domestic, concerned, resigned. They are mostly wives. Sometimes there are surrogate wives, who tend to be neurotic.

4. The Rigid (8/12 male)

These have many or all of the following characteristics: they are authoritarian, censorious, fastidious, arrogant, snobbish, pompous, earnest. Three variants of this type stress the disciplinarian/censorious, the pedantry, or snobbishness.
An interesting way of arranging these types is in relation to their degree of socialisation. They can be seen as under-socialised, correctly socialised, or over-socialised (repressed) as follows:

Under-Socialised	Correctly Socialised	Over-Socialised
Wayward Inept	Normal	Rigid

This provides a model of 'norm' and 'deviancy' where 'deviancy' is defined as incorrect socialisation. There are two aspects to this socialisation: Firstly, the learning of adult skills which are physical, mental and social. Failure to develop these skills results in 'childlike' qualities of ineptitude. These skills can also be lost, as in loss of faculties in old age, which likewise leads to ineptitude. Secondly, socialisation involves control

of instincts or the pleasure principle. We must repress some of our tendencies towards pleasure and instant gratification so that we can live and work together, in particular our tendencies to indolence, greed and sexual 'excess'. Failure to repress the pleasure principle produces waywardness. It is also possible to be over-socialised, or over-repressed, leading to the excessive (as opposed to 'normal') neuroses of the rigid.

The basic problematic of the domestic sitcom is usually one in which characters are incompatible because they are socialised to differing degrees. The four types play against each other. Interestingly, in half the cases there were no 'normal' characters in the sitcom at all: there was an absent norm, or, the norm was structuring absence, a feature I shall return to later. Further, ¾ of all characters were 'deviant'.

Gender and class differences in character are very marked.

Gender

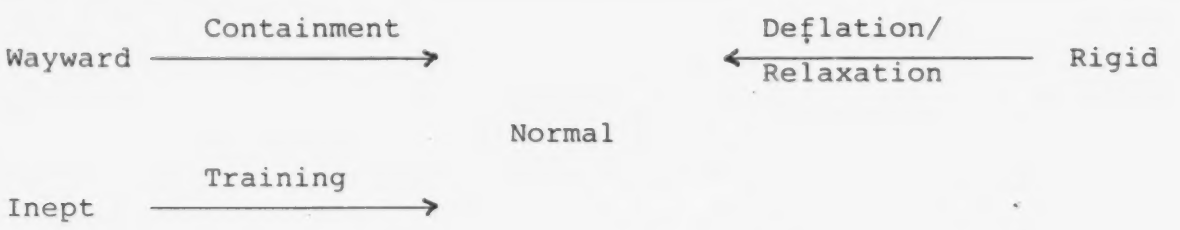
Domestic sitcom is male dominated. There are significantly more male characters and the males tend to dominate the narrative even when there are an equal number of female characters, because they are much more deviant than females, (1/5 of males were consensual, ½ of females were consensual), and it is deviancy which drives the narrative. The females who were deviant tended to be much less so, more borderline, than males. The Wayward are all male, with 'rogues' the dominant sub-type, and the Normal are

all female. More females ($\frac{1}{2}$) than males (1/3) are married.

Class

Most males are working class, most females are middle-class. Almost all the Wayward are working class, and almost all the Normal are middle class. Most married males are middle class - marriage seems to be for women and middle-class men.

The characters then can be seen in relation to a norm of properly socialised domesticity in which most characters, male, present a problem, needing a movement to bring them into the norm:



Such movements cannot take place of course or the problematic would disintegrate. A significant feature of sitcom is its dependence on character alone to generate narrative movement, unlike, for example, soaps or crime fiction where actions, behaviour which breaks the law (of Family and State), give narrative momentum.

This model of character-type is inevitably crude and it is worth

adding at this point four subsidiary types. These were subsidiary in the sense that there were significantly fewer of these characters but nevertheless they seemed to coalesce into types. Again they are gender and class differentiated:

(i) The Dumb-Blonde: a combination of mild waywardness (suggestive, 'sexy') and mild ineptitude (scatty, simple, irrational), thus in need of some containment and some training. Working and middle-class. (Dumb-blondes here are not necessarily as 'obvious' as in film).

(ii) The Vacillator: a slightly rigid female type these are coy, bashful, indecisive, careful, earnest. They need relaxing. Their rigidity is sexual - they are concerned about their virtue, but affectedly so. Most middle-class.

(iii) The Urbane: These men are a little wayward, being civilised, refined, courteous, smooth, sophisticated: but bachelors and so not yet contained. Never working class.

(iv) Husbands are rather rigid: sympathetic and long suffering, caring, respectable, conservative. Usually middle class. They have professional occupations and so are not centred on the home in the way that wives are.

These types fit onto the socialisation map on or near the borderline between norm and deviance:

Under-Socialised	Norm	Over-Socialised
Dumb-blonde		Vacillator
Urbane		Husband

(A full diagram of types is given in Appendix 5).

This typology of character in sitcom (bestiary?) is limited in scope and we need to bear in mind the caveats mentioned earlier about the limitations of analysis of character and types, especially perhaps the potentially Procrustian nature of typing, with its emphasis on similarities. Nevertheless the analysis seems suggestive: it offers one way of elucidating the discourses of domestic sitcom, uncovering a model based on socialisation which could not be revealed by attention to only a single sitcom, or even a very few. The analysis suggests that the basic problematic of (British domestic) sitcom assumes a consensus about socialisation in relation to the Family and arranges particular types of deviancy around it. These assumptions about the Family are distinctly gender and class biased.

Whether or not the 'norm' of socialisation is represented by specific characters this norm is assumed as the position of the

text from which deviancy will be recognised and found amusing. It is the job of the narration to construct this recognition of deviancy and incongruence in the Family as comic.

NARRATIVE

A. Elements of Sitcom Narrative

Many of the elements of narrative which normally engage the viewer are diminished in sitcom in favour of the comedic. Whereas in traditional narrative drama the cinematic or televisual codes are pressed into the service of narrative, in sitcom the narrative codes seem to be pressed into the service of comedy. In the movement towards comedy elements of narrative are interrupted and whereas in fictional drama generally such interruptions would lead to non-involvement and frustration in sitcom this is compensated by amusement. As a result narrative grip is loosened and narration is weak, or 'distanced'. Five aspects of narrative seem particularly affected:

1. Illusionism

If illusionism is concerned to engage interest in what is represented without drawing attention to the process of representation then sitcom seems only partly illusionist. It does maintain many of the codes of TV illusionism such as editing, lighting, framing, as well as avoiding direct address (actors looking at the camera). But clearly the illusion of mimetic reality is severely compromised by the declared intention to generate laughter and by the usual presence of the studio audience whose responses are part of the programme. This weakening of

the illusion draws attention to the performance of the actors (term used to include actresses) as we watch them pretending their roles. It is not unusual for the audience and the actor having to struggle not to break the pretence. This can happen for example when the audience laughs a lot and the actors have to delay their delivery; or when the comedy depends upon some characters and the studio audience knowing more than other characters because in this case the laughter of the studio audience reveals the gap to the characters who are in ignorance. Interestingly, although the illusionism is only partial it is considered imperative for the actors to maintain the pretence.

2. Voyeurism

Voyeurism is the activity of looking at something without being seen and is one of the pleasures of a fictional narrative drama. Voyeurism on TV is less intense than voyeurism in the cinema, the image being familiar and intimate rather than being an 'impossible' one of present-absence, and the conditions of reception being less conducive to voyeurism of any intensity because viewers can be observed observing. In sitcom, as the illusionism is weakened, so is voyeurism: it is difficult to establish very firmly the feeling that the characters are unaware of our spectatorship. Whilst voyeurism is present its operation seems relatively weak, even compared to other TV drama.

3. Fictional Space

In sitcom we commonly have only limited entry into the fictional space of the narrative. There are two aspects of this. Firstly, use of a studio audience means the sets usually have three sides and are frontal, with the cameras along the front. Entry into the fictional space is thus limited to movement across the front and the use of differing focal lengths to enter the space. Secondly, there seems to be little use of the close-up, or the zoom-in, despite the staginess of the action which would make such shots easy to perform. It may be that the emotional intensity conveyed by close-up and zoom-in is thought inappropriate for comedy since laughing suggests a distance from that laughed at.

4. Identification

The weak voyeurism and inability to enter the fictional space combine to weaken identifications. The simple procedure of putting the spectator in the position of characters (more or less) in a shot - reverse shot exchange is denied to much sitcom. This weakness of identification seems commensurate with comic distance, although strong identifications can still be generated, and are used with some modifications to the form, in such 'sitcoms' as Butterflies.

5. Hermeneutics

The hermeneutic code which establishes and resolves enigmas, motivating the desire to know (who dunnit? what will happen?), seems little used in sitcom. Where enigmas are set up they are not used to stimulate epistemophilia or generate excitement but merely as a pretext for comic adventure, satisfying the need to generate something of a story around which to hang comedy. Thus the narrative structure of sitcom is unlike that of mainstream cinema which operates a strong hermeneutic code in which problems and enigmas are mobilised at the outset and resolved at the end. Likewise sitcom is unlike other TV genres which have a highly developed hermeneutic code, such as soaps, and a corollary of this is that whilst sitcom series and even individual episodes are easy to leave they are also easy to enter.

A further element element worth noting is an absence of spectacle: pleasures of spectacle in landscape, action and mise en scene are denied in most sitcom which is studio bound in simple domestic or workplace settings. Even British soaps, though domestic, shift location much more frequently than sitcom.

One of the ways sitcom tries to counter these effects and bolster viewer interest is the use of a laugh track. As Ellis (1982) points out the relationship between sound and vision in TV is different to the cinema: in TV the sound is more significant because it cannot assume a transfixed spectator and must therefore

seek to win the attention, assumed to be constantly drifting away, of the domestic viewer. Generally this process involves programme announcements, signature tunes, music and dialogue or commentary - "sounds tend to anchor meaning on TV, where the image tends to anchor it with cinema". (p 129). In sitcom this includes the laugh track: "Laughter runs through comedy programmes to ensure a continued attention rather than to incite laughter from the domestic viewer". (p 162). This laughter, whether 'real' or 'canned', certainly has the function of drawing viewer attention to the screen, and can therefore be seen as compensation for narrative weakness, but I would argue that Ellis overstates this. Better to say as well as to incite laughter. Presence of the laugh track seriously affects the mode of address and is needed to provide the comic 'frame' from which the drama will be found funny. Those comedies, particularly sitcoms, without a laugh track can make viewers uncertain how to respond.

The technique of recording sitcoms without an audience and then showing an audience the completed episode and recording the laughter, much used in the USA, allows a stronger narration because the fictional space can be entered more fluently and actors are less conscious of audience during performance.

B. Mode of Address

If laughter is a dispersal and release of psychic energy we can see that sitcom narrative is one in which psychic energy is continually developed and dispersed, a process which is both

binding-in and pushing-out, where the viewer is drawn in sufficient for the comedy to take effect and also distanced by the psychic release. The interruptions of the usual narrative effects produce a pleasurable release of psychic energy. [1]

The imperative towards comedy disables the traditional dramatic narration and at the same time insists on a consensus from which the drama is considered funny. To an extent this inhibits the development of any alternative discourses in sitcom: constant return to comedy is constant return to an already established consensus. This makes using sitcom as a revelatory form rather difficult - more difficult in this respect for example than in melodrama where sympathy and identification with characters can carry viewers a fair way.

Generally there are two methods which are used to circumvent this narrative imperative to comedy and consensus, and to use sitcom 'progressively'. One is to have periods of non-comedy (Butterflies is a good example.) Here the series moves out of comedy, generates pathos, and moves back again. Such a procedure puts a strain on the narrative whose elements have to be supported, particularly identifications. In this case, if the tactic is used much, the sitcom narrative must be adjusted and it moves away from sitcom towards, for example, melodrama.

1 The psychic functioning of humour has so far proved difficult to establish with any clarity. See Appendix 7.

Another method of circumventing the sitcom narrative form is to give all the comedy a serious underpinning. If all comedy is to be made 'serious' then it must both occupy the consensus and subvert it at the same time. To do this is to move into irony, satire and sarcasm and the problem here is to sustain these in a sitcom whilst making the satire clear. Such a form requires a priviledged reading and can easily be seen by large sections of a mass audience as 'straight'. Such a problem was graphically demonstrated by Till Death Us Do Part where the attempt to ridicule a loud mouthed, racist, sexist bigot was not entirely successful: loud mouths, racists, sexists and bigots easily reading the series as a vindication of their position. (Which is not to say it was entirely unsuccessful.)

Sitcom narration tries to position viewers where they will find the comedy amusing. If this position is refused the drama will be considered dull, tragic, sick, etc. This positioning is 'weak'. The weakening of the narrative codes and the constant dispersal of psychic energy in humour make sitcoms normally less than gripping. As such, if the comedy is not found amusing then there is little else to sustain viewing. Sitcoms are relatively easy to leave and easy to enter and are unlikely to cause much frustration. (A 'failed' thriller is frustrating, a 'failed' soap may be disappointing, but a 'failed' sitcom merely dull.)

The 'distanced' narration of sitcom draws attention to actorly performance mobilising what Cook (1982) calls a 'dual focus' which

allows analytic distance and active readership. The dual focus is brought about by that tension which always exists between narrative structure and acting performance: noticing an actor's performance suggests a certain distance from the narrative. In comedy this tension is blatant because the narrative is weak, the plot full of incongruity and reversal, and the performances full of routines and jokes. So the tension is generally acknowledged and built into the comic structure. We enjoy performance - the telling - as well as the story. Such is what Cook means by dual response and he has this to say about it:

> "Now the particular property of social comedy to elicit this dual response means that it raises sharply the question of the extent to which it is possible to enjoy narrativity, the mode of telling, for its own sake without bringing to bear on it notions of meaning and particularly of effect". (Cook 1982 p.17).

and he goes on:

> "Indeed, I would want to argue that the distancing effect of social comedy - the dual reading focus - allows, at its best, simultaneously an engaged enjoyment and an analytic distance: that is, it demands active, not passive, readers". (ibid p 18).

Sitcom narration works to position viewers in a norm of familiar socialisation from which particular sorts of deviance will be seen as playful and amusing. This textual work must ensure that the incongruence and incompatibility generated by the problematic is comic and not tragic or merely dull. There is an ambiguous

relationship with deviancy since it motivates the comedy and is to that extent not only acknowledged but celebrated. On the other hand the distanced narration encourages a 'dual focus' whereby viewers may recognise the potential tragedy in the drama of incompatibility, as well as its ideological operations, yet still find it enjoyable and amusing.

3. DISCOURSE AND IDEOLOGY

Domestic sitcom is inevitably about 'The Family' but we can identify its themes more precisely. In the sitcoms I examined four main themes emerged. In order of dominance these were:

1. Heterosexual Coupling. Interactions concerening courtship, romance, sex, love and marriage.

2. Parental Responsibilities: either to teenage children or elderly parents, giving interactions around generation gaps, responsibilities, dependence.

3. Domestic Efficiency. Interactions concerned with domestic labour, harmony in the household, fair play, rule keeping.

These three are essentially about The Family. There was a fourth theme:

4. General Social Mores, especially in relation to friends and neighbours but also strangers in occupational roles such as milkman, bank manager, police officer.

Generally speaking then (British, domestic) sitcom is concerned with socialisation in relation to The Family, especially issues around heterosexual coupling, parental responsibilities and domestic efficiency. It assumes a norm, almost exclusively

occupied by middle-class married women, around which are arranged three principal forms of deviancy, the Wayward, the Inept and the Rigid, largely populated by men. The position of correct socialisation in the Family is held by women who in achieving it become generally passive, re-active and dull. Problems of socialisation are experienced mostly by men, whose deviance is fun and generates the comedy.

The wives - sensible, patient, assuaging and competent - stand for norm of proper socialisation in relation to the Family. Around them are arranged the deviant, disruptive types. The deviance is amusing, non-threatening, not really serious. There is no question of the wives ever leaving the wayward, inept or rigid characters they live with: the deviants threaten neither the Family nor any families. Of course given the incongruence of the characters there is friction and this is the basis of the comedy. In fact, though, not only are the deviant not really threatening they are actually the source of the comedy and this makes it difficult to perceive them as either threatening or unpleasant, whilst on the other hand the wives are rather dull. What we have then is a 'norm' of stable but dull family life surrounded by deviant but colourful and amusing types. Thus there seems to be an ambivalence about the norm/deviant distinction which the sitcoms are playing with: stable but dull/disruptive but fun.

The way this ambivalence is resolved I think is that the deviance is normalised, or naturalised. Mapped onto the axis of

socialisation the deviants represent failures of socialisation which are 'typical', 'natural' and not excessive. In reality these forms of deviancy could fracture a family but the fixity of the sitcom problematic cannot allow this and so sitcom deviance, whilst it acknowledges certain kinds of troubles for the Family, functions as a kind of double containment: threats to the Family of a contained sort and to a contained degree. This containment seeks to ensure that the threats are amusing rather than pathetic and it is the work of the text to consolidate this.

Through the centrality of deviant character types sitcom plays endlessly with the boundary between norm and deviant, socialised and unsocialised, acceptable and unacceptable. As a comedy of social disruption it works to define the acceptable. In doing so it must acknowledge the unacceptable and through textual work construct this unacceptability as non-threatening and amusing, which depends on a consensus about the kinds of threat The Family 'naturally' suffers.

Each type of deviance is given as a biological/psychological problem for socialisation. The dominant form of Waywardness is the rogue, an all-male type usually given working-class origins. Rogues are pleasure-seeking and resist the constraints of Family. Their lively wit, uninhibited heterosexuality and chauvinism are amusing and contrasted with the dullness of correct socialisation and also the neuroses, albeit amusing, of the Rigid. This notion that containment is a problem for males much more than females

is clearly ideological. It is also widespread and persistent, noted for example by Robin Wood (1979) in American comedies of the Thirties and Forties. Sitcom accepts monogomy as natural and inevitable and plays with the strains and sacrifices required 'naturally' of men.

Likewise the Inept have a naturalised problem in their failure to develop adult skills or their loss of such skills in old age. Why such ineptitude should be predominantly made is not so obvious: why is it that physical, mental and social incompetence is funny in males but not in females? Medhurst and Tuck have noted the common tactic of presenting wife/husband relationships as mother/son ones and claim it to be 'a device which enables sitcom to avoid directly addressing genuine marital conflicts' (1982 p46).

The Rigid - disciplinarians, pedants and snobs - are over-repressed, often hypocritical and generally neurotic. In a sense they are the obverse of the Wayward, assertive but gone overboard on discipline and morality. They are Mixed in gender but given the gender differences of the other types to which they relate should be seen separately. For females they are the only assertive type and may represent what happens to females who try to assert themselves. For males they seem to represent the alternative to roguishness, keen on domestic order: if males accept containment they quickly become rigid and neurotic.

Deviance is represented as natural problems encountered in the socialisation of The Family. On the socialisation model there is no place for deviancy which is not 'natural'. A feminist, for example, is deviant in relation to the norm of patriarchal middle-class Family life, but this deviance would not be a result of incorrect socialisation: a feminist discourse would challenge the whole model. She could not be funny as a deviant type because she would be outside the model from which the sitcom is considered funny. This is not to say that aspects of feminism cannot appear in sitcom: on the contrary a tendency of sitcom, as of all popular culture, is to incorporate by caricature, which can be done in sitcom by reducing discourse to character-type, feminism to waywardness, ineptitude or rigidity, a problem of individual socialisation.

Thus the whole socialisation model, deviance included, is constructed as a norm. Problems for heterosexual coupling, parental responsibilities and domestic efficiency are caused by the natural difficulties of becoming adult and balancing pleasure and reality principals. These problems are experienced differently according to class and especially gender, but in any case are moderate enough to be narrated as amusing.

According to sitcom writer Brian Cooke "Situation comedy characters are usually normal people involved in real life situations. Just like your Auntie Hilda and Uncle Wilf" (Cooke 1983 p2). Some

people have aunties and uncles with a more radical streak than Hilda and Wilf but it would be foolish to expect them to dominate sitcom. Mainstream comedy plays in a largely reactionary universe where contemporary issues have been evacuated in favour of the antiseptic world Eaton (1978/9 p70) referred to as 'the timeless nowness of television situations', and where an assumed consensus is returned with each laugh:

> "Whatever sketch or sitcom you eventually write has to be amusing. Even if it is beautifully written, compelling in its content and fearsome in its integrity, its prime purpose is to promote laughter". (Cooke, op cit pix).

Claims are sometimes made about the progressive potential of comedy, to say the unsayable, to challenge hierarchy and discourse. Mary Douglas' notion of the joke as an anti-rite makes comedy look like a powerful weapon:

> "Where rites assert hierarchy and order, jokes have the opposite effect, destroying hierarchy and order, denigrating and devaluing the dominant values". (Goodlad 1976 p35).

Although sitcom is a comedy of social disruption I would argue that a significant feature is its lack of challenge to hierarchy and dominant discourses about the Family. The opposite seems to be the case. Should sitcom want to offer alternative discourses it must struggle against its form. If sitcom is helping the social order define itself through disruption then it is at the

same time containing and innoculating, only admitting threats to the Family on its own terms. What this means for the domestic sitcom is acknowledgement of difficulties for the Family on the one hand the incorporation of these difficulties into consensual notions of the form they take, notably individual, biological/ psychological 'failures' of socialisation, and on the other hand textual work which endeavours to generate comedy from the acknowledged difficulties.

Such a view fits well with claims that television hegemonically naturalises those troubling features of social life which inevitably surface in a patriarchal and capitalist social formation. It is easy to see sitcom as a well-oiled machine for the naturalisation of particular consensual notions of the Family. Whilst there will be those sitcoms which try to be progressive and there will be occasions in the more typical ones when gaps and contradictions appear, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the 'stodgy wedge' of domestic sitcom is ideologically reactionary in effect.

It is tempting to be essentialist about sitcom form and pessimistic about its ability to construct anything but the most reactionary discourses. This would be too simple. In the first place there is no 'essential' form. Narrative strategies mentioned earlier - movement into pathos, use of irony - are available to all sitcom and have been used with some success in questioning dominant

discourses. Furthermore there are some unresolved issues which make categorical declarations of ideological effect difficult to sustain, in particular the following three: firstly, sitcom acknowledges, even celebrates, certain forms of deviance in relation to the Family. Whilst it works to 'naturalise' these problems, there is inevitably an ambivalence involved and it is not clear exactly how viewers are positioned. The deviants are celebrated but must at the same time be recognised as deviant. Also, whether all deviants are equally sanctioned is not yet clear - there is a tendency, for example, to laugh <u>with</u> the Wayward but to laugh <u>at</u> the Rigid. Secondly, the 'dual focus', present in all fiction but unusually strong in sitcom seems to offer opportunity for both pleasure and ideological disagreement, involvement and detachment. In this case can we accept the comedy yet avoid occupying the norm? How do we decide what the effects are here? Fianlly, it is worth remembering that somewhere at the heart of the pleasure of sitcom is humour and we have as yet little understanding of its mechanisms.

Lovell's assertion about popular culture seems apt for sitcom:

> "... it is necessary to insist that because popular culture does not belong to the masses, feminism and revolution, it is not captured for reaction, patriarchy and domination either. Rather it is situated ambivalently and in contradictory ways, in relation to both". (Dyer et al 1981 p49).

Given the abundance and popularity of sitcom it is important that its discursive operations are elucidated, the extent and nature of its captivity widely understood. At present no thorough delineation of the genre is available. It is hoped that the work described here will contribute to such a project.

1 I am indebted to David Buckingham for his assistance in the development of this research.

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Appendix 1

The 20 Sitcoms Studies and Gender Domination

Introduction

I have tried to be as accurate as possible in describing and cataloging the features of character referred to but the accuracy is bound to be variable and I do not wish to claim watertight research procedures. Without detailed textual analysis on each sitcom such a claim would be inappropriate. In any case my knowledge of the sitcoms varies from series where I have examined every episode to ones where I have only seen two or three episodes.

The research is tentative but, I hope, productive.

The Sitcoms Studied and Gender Domination

		Domination
1.	Home to Roost	M
2.	Three Up Two Down	E
3.	Roll Over Beethoven	M
4.	Full House	M
5.	The Front Line	M
6.	Relative Strangers	M
7.	Mann's Best Friends	M
8.	That's My Boy	F
9.	Just Good Friends	E
10.	Only Fools and Horses	M
11.	Fresh Fields	F
12.	Duty Free	E
13.	Ever Decreasing Circles	M
14.	To The Manor Born	F
15.	Me and My Girl	M
16.	Terry and June	E
17.	Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em	M
18.	Rising Damp	M
19.	Man About the House	E
20.	The Good Life	E

M = Male : 11
F = Female : 3
E = Equal : 6

Appendix 2

Relation of Gender to Consensus

SITCOM	UNDER-SOCIALISED	CONSENSUAL	OVER-SOCALISED
1	M	F	M
2	M M		F F
3	M		F M
4	M F		F M
5	M		M
6	MM		M
7	MMM F		M
8	F	FM	
9	M		F
10	MMM		
11	F	M	
12	M F	F	M
13	M	F	M
14	M		F F
15	M	F	
16	M	F	
17	M	F	
18	M M		F
19	MM FF	F	
20		F	M FM

M = Male F = Female

Notes

Sitcoms with no consensual characters : 10
Sitcoms with consensual characters: 7 with other characters on one side. Of these, 6 have F in consensus. 3 with characters on both sides as well.
General predominance of males on outside and females in centre.

Appendix 3

Character Units

Nature of Character groups.

SITCOM	COUPLES				SOLO		TRIO			GROUP
	1h	2h	mC	fC	mS	fS	mT	fT	Tm	
1			✓							
2	✓									
3	✓									
4		✓								
5			✓							
6			✓							
7										✓
8									✓	
9	✓									
10							✓			
11	✓									
12		✓								
13									✓	
14						✓				
15					✓					
16	✓									
17	✓									
18										✓
19										✓
20	✓									
TOTAL	7	2	3	0	1	1	1	0	2	3

KEY

Couples:
- 1h = 1 heterosexual couple
- 2h = 2 heterosexual couples
- mC = Male couple
- fC = Female couple

Solo:
- mS = Male solo
- fS = Female solo

Trio:
- mT = Male trio
- fT = Female trio
- Tm = Trio mixed

Group: More than 3 characters not in couples

Appendix 4

Themes of the Sitcoms

This is a rough picture of what I take to be the main themes in each sitcom.

Generally the themes around which the comedy circulates are given by the the basic problematic: the character-types and their relationships to each other in a particular situation eg husband of a particular type with wife of a particular type in a defined situation such as living with another couple, being retired or unemployed, and so on.

SITCOM	THEMES
1	indolence and responsibilities, father-son, marriage, sex.
2	marriage, family, taste, sex, domestic order, gender.
3	courtship, sex, love, parents, taste.
4	heterosexual coupling generally, gender, domestic order, responsibilities.
5	being Black in Britain, police, unemployment, domestic order.
6	courtship, sex, father-son, domestic order.
7	domestic order, sex, laziness and responsibilities.
8	relatives, friendships, marriage, taste.
9	romance, sex, gender, desire, marriage.
10	family, masculinity, class, indolence and work.
11	female skills, domestic order, family, marriage.
12	heterosexual coupling, battle of sexes.
13	social interaction, romance and marriage, social mores, repression.
14	social mores and interaction, rural and urban, aristocracy and nouveau riche, employer and employee.
15	heterosexual coupling, parent-child.
16	marriage, romance, sex, taste, personal efficiency.
17	social competence , physical competence, gender, social roles.
18	romance, social and sexual mores, gender.
19	heterosexual coupling, domestic efficiency, gender, responsibilities.
20	heterosexual coupling, domestic efficiency, gender, responsibilities.

The main themes then seem to be the following, in order of priority:

1. Heterosexual Coupling: notions of courtship, romance , sex, love and marriage

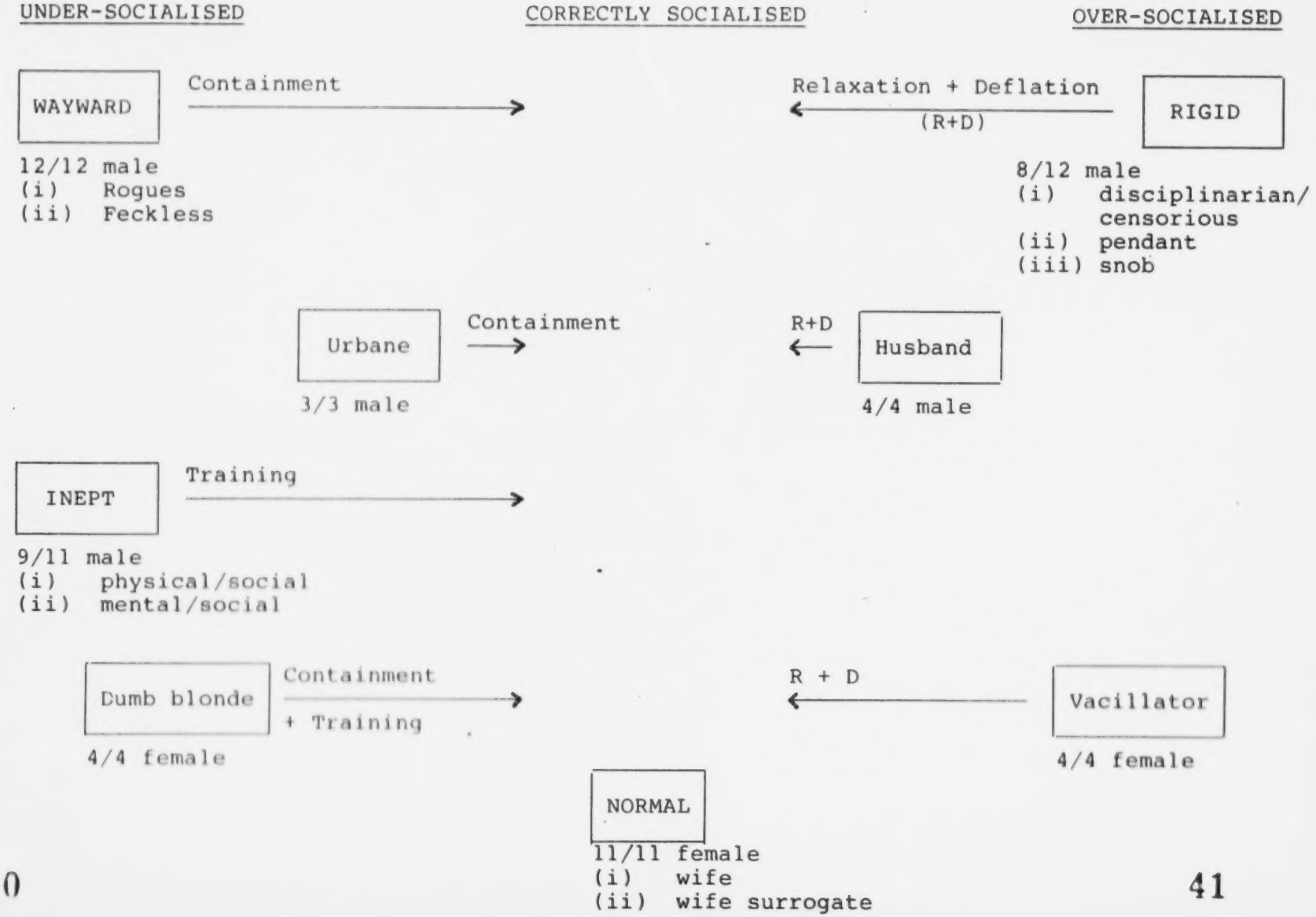
2. Parents and Children: the dependence of adolescent children or elderly parents, generation gap, responsibility and waywardness, dependence.

3. Domestic Efficiency: domestic labour, fair play, harmony in the house, rule keeping.

4. General Social Mores: friends and neigbours, strangers in occupational roles.

APPENDIX 5

Character Types and Socialisation



Appendix 6

General Sitcoms: Setting, Gender Domination and Character Units

The same reservations apply here as were mentioned in the introduction to Appendix 3 - briefly, the cataloging is rough and ready. The list includes the 20 domestic sitcoms already discussed. All are British. Almost all were broadcast during the period of research, though some are quite old.

Key and Totals follow the list.

SITCOM	SETTING	GENDER DOMINATION	CHARACTER UNITS
1. Agony	b	f	sf
2. It Ain't Half Hot Mum	w	m	Gm
3. Allo, Allo	b	e	G
4. Are You Being Served?	w	e	G
5. Bootle Saddles	d	m	G
6. The Bright Side	d	f	sf
7. The Bounder	d	m	sm
8. Butterflies	d	f	sf
9. Chance in a Million	b	e	C1h
10. Dad's Army	w	m	Gm
11. Dream Stuffing	d	f	C1f
12. Duty Free	d	e	C2h
13. Ever Decreasing Circles	d	m	T
14. Fairly Secret Army	b	m	T
15. A Fine Romance	d	e	C1h
16. Fresh Fields	d	e	C1h
17. The Front Line	d	m	C1m
18. Full House	d	m	C2h
19. The Gaffer	w	m	G
20. The Good Life	d	e	C2h
21. Hallelujah	w	f	C1f

SITCOM	SETTING	GENDER DOMINATION	CHARACTER UNITS
22. Hi de Hi	w	e	G
23. Hilary	b	f	Sf
24. Home to Roost	d	m	Clm
25. Just Good Friends	d	e	Clh
26. Lame Ducks	d	m	G
27. Last of the Summer Wine	w	m	Tm
28. Leaving	d	e	Clh
29. Man About the House	d	e	G
30. Mann's Best Friends	d	m	G
31. Me and My Girl	d	m	Sm
32. The Mistress	d	f	Sf
33. Moving	d	e	Clh
34. No Place Like Home	d	e	G
35. No Problem	b	e	G
36. Only Fools and Horses	b	m	Tm
37. Porridge	w	m	Gm
38. Relative Strangers	b	m	Clm
39. Rising Damp	d	m	G
40. Roll Over Beethoven	d	e	Clh
41. Shelley	b	m	Sm
42. Solo	d	f	Sf
43. Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em	b	m	Clh
44. Steptoe and Son	d	m	Clm
45. Struggle	w	m	G
46. Terry and June	d	e	Clh
47. That's My Boy	d	f	T
48. There Comes a Time	b	m	Sm
49. Three Up Two Down	d	e	Clh
50. To The Manor Born	d	f	Sf
51. Tripper's Day	w	m	G
52. Up the Elephant and Round the Castle	b	m	Sm
53. The Worker	w	m	Sm
54. Yes Minister	w	m	Gm

Keys and Totals

Setting

d	=	domestic	30
w	=	'work'	12
b	=	both	12

('work' = outside the house eg in Last of the Summer Wine, as well as workplace)

Gender Domination

m	=	male	27
f	=	female	10
e	=	equal	17

Character Units

Couples	C1h	=	1 heterosexual couple	10	
	C2h	=	2 heterosexual couples	3	
	C1m	=	1 male couple	4	19
	C1f	=	1 female couple	2	
Solo	Sm	=	Solo male	6	13
	Sf	=	Solo female	7	
Trio	T	=	Trio, mixed	3	
	Tm	=	Trio, male	2	5
	Tf	=	Trio, female	0	
Group	G	=	Group, mixed	13	
	Gm	=	Group, male	4	17
	Gf	=	Group, female	0	

Appendix 7

Humour

GOODLAD, S. (1976) 'On the Social Significance of Television Comedy; in BIGSBY, C.W.E. (Ed.) Approaches to Popular Culture, London, Edward Arnold.

NEALE, S. (1981) 'Psychoanalysis and Comedy', Screen, v22n2.

The above articles are fruitful starting points in a complex field. As Goodlad says "Comedy is a part of the wider field of humour, and the study of humour is a field in which theories abound" (p32). He cites a classificatory summary of principal theories devised by Keith Spiegel which contains eight types of theory: biological; instinct and evolution; superiority; incongruity; surprise; ambivalence; release and relief; configurational; psychoanalytic.

Recent work in film theory has tried to develop psychoanalytical theories of humour for the analysis of comedy and comic narratives. Its conclusions are as yet uncertain. After an exploration of comic mechanisms suggested by Freud, Neale states:

> "One thing certainly emerges from these complexities and confusions: much more work remains to be done in attempting to apply these comic mechanisms to narrative forms". (p43).